

SAMMY, THE SOCIABLE SEAL

Nina Warner Hooke

Readers Digest, Vol. 86, No. 515, March 1965

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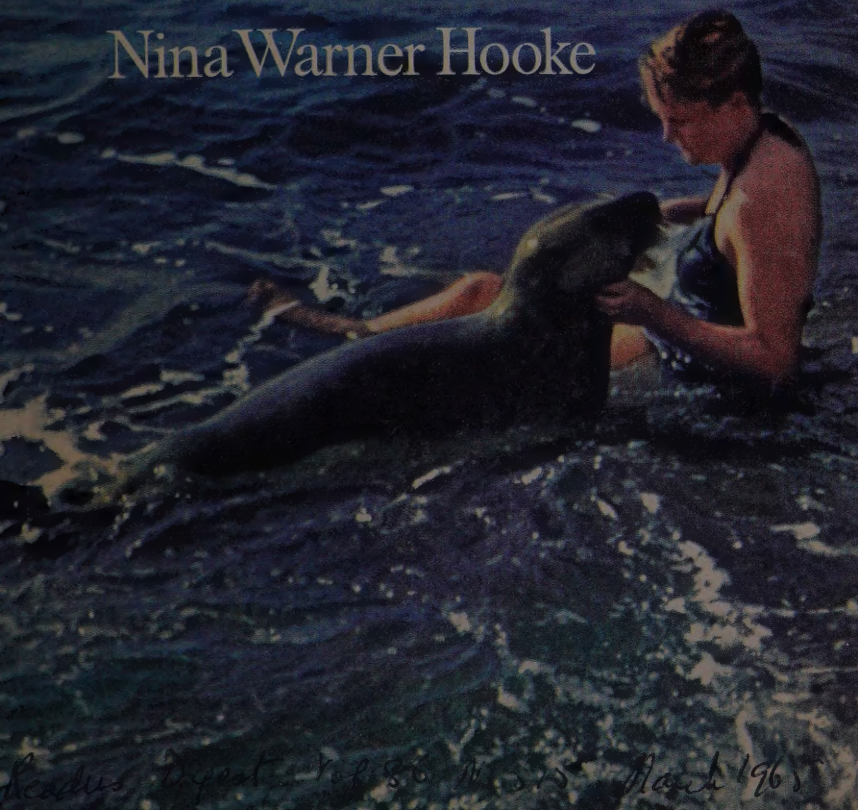


BOOK SECTION II

Sammy, the Sociable Seal

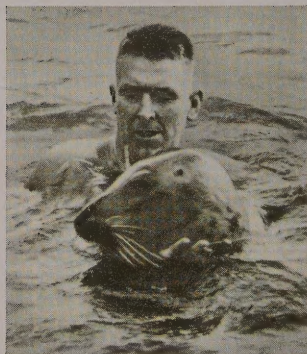
CONDENSED FROM "THE SEAL SUMMER"

Nina Warner Hooke



Readers Digest Vol 86 No 515 March 1965

Sammy, the Sociable Seal



He was a creature of the wild when he suddenly appeared on the south coast of England the spring of 1961.

That fall he went away again, as mysteriously as he had come. But for one memorable summer he displayed a marked preference for the company of human beings, reveling in their admiration and applause, swimming among them, and playing tricks on them with amiable exuberance.

Fortunately, his closest human companion proved to be Nina Warner Hooke, the British novelist and playwright, who has set down this strange adventure in "The Seal Summer" with affection, awe, and a deep feeling for natural beauty

ON THE south Dorset coast, not far from my village, there is a cove called Chapman's Pool. It is a wild place, frequented in summer by fishermen and holiday makers, deserted for the rest of the year.

The Pool is a quarter of a mile at its widest point, and lies in a half-circle of shale cliffs. To reach it you must start from the headland 400 feet above, and make your way down a ravine by slippery tracks. The beach is of coarse sand and



*"A cove called Chapman's Pool
— a wild place, the beach strewn
with boulders"*

pebbles thinly spread over the ledges of slate. It is strewn with boulders and the flotsam of the tides.

In wintry weather the scene is somber and desolate. But on a bright day in summer the Pool can be a place of enchantment, the

water intensely blue, a jewel in a silver setting.

It is a timeless, quiet place. Nothing moves but a leaping fish or a plunging cormorant. There is no sound but the rumbling talk of the fishermen working at their gear, or the scream of a falcon from the hill.

This was once, of all places hereabouts, the most dear to me. But now I hesitate to go. I miss too painfully the friend I once had here, a sea creature who used to come arrowing through the water at my call. Four years ago, this cove was the scene of a friendship as rich and strange as any ever recorded. For my friend was a wild seal.

It was first seen by Sid Lander, a fisherman, early in May 1961. Sid and his son Alan were dropping crab pots a half mile out from shore when a seal bobbed up near their boat. It seemed startled and swam off to a safer distance, then sat up on its tail with part of its body out of water, and watched the men.

Had either man shouted or made menacing gestures, this story would never have been written. But they did not. Instead, Alan tossed the onlooker one of the whittings he used for bait. Instantly the seal dived for it.

Two days later the men saw the seal again, this time stretched on a ledge near the beach. Knowing of my interest in wildlife, a friend

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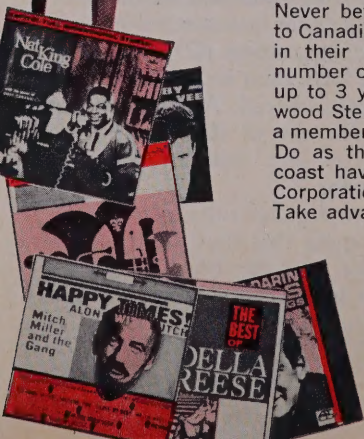


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telephoned me, and I went down to the Pool. It was a raw, gray spring afternoon with tatters of mist hanging on the hills. A small group of people stood on the beach looking chilled and disappointed. There was no sign of the seal.

Percy Wallace, a coastguard who does a bit of fishing in his spare time, shouted from a nearby boatshed. "It came in this morning and then made off again. I doubt it's far away. Try hollering."

Our cries rolled back at us from the cliffs. Some startled gulls rose from the rocks. Nothing else happened. We tried again.

"Hullo-oo!"

Then suddenly someone pointed. "Look!"

Far out in the Pool a gleaming, round object had surfaced. At first it was stationary; then it slowly moved toward us. It came to a halt within four or five yards of where we stood. The heavy body was half out of water, supported by the front flippers. The large eyes were benign and calm, the blunt nose very black against the sleek, pewter-gray head.

I was overcome by the strangeness of the occurrence, oblivious to everything but the creature in front of me. He measured roughly $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet from the end of his nose to the tip of the small tail between his hind flippers. The broad nostrils opened and closed, and the long white whiskers were wiry and thick. The ears were round holes without external parts. The eye-

balls seemed oddly flat, with large pupils and very thick lenses. When he opened his jaws, I saw a formidable set of teeth.

Each of the flippers was fringed with five shiny black, nonretractile nails. They resembled the claws of a bear, though neater and less sharp. (Later I discovered how adroitly they were used, for holding fish, for grooming the coat and for gripping slippery rocks.)

"It won't stay, of course," Percy said. "Seals like lonely places. When the season starts, the tourists will scare it off."

He was totally mistaken. For the thing which brought the seal to the cove — and which was to keep him there for almost six months — was human society. Why this should have been so is a mystery we were never able to fathom. The instances of a wild animal associating freely with human beings are rare indeed. (Two other recent, well-known cases were Elsa, the African lioness,* and Opo, the New Zealand dolphin.)

Most seals are protected only in the breeding season, but even this small mercy is often disregarded by fishermen, who have slaughtered them in countless numbers. So whether my friend was unusually trusting, or whether his curiosity was stronger than his fear of men, I do not know. I do know that he gave to me and to many others that

* See "Born Free," The Reader's Digest, June '60.

summer a joyous comradeship, and a unique opportunity to learn his nature and his ways.

"Good Doggie"

"THE SEAL was on the beach all day yesterday," Mary Hickman told me early in the following week. "He came and lay quite close to me. His fur looks like moth-eaten velvet when it's dry. When Percy went out in his dinghy," she continued, "the seal flopped into the sea and followed. He kept diving under the boat and popping up on the other side. Then two more people arrived on the beach, and he came tearing back. They asked if it was safe to stroke him, but I advised against it."

This problem worried me also; the seal had a threatening armory of razor-sharp teeth, the canines about an inch long. "Eventually," I said, "some fool's going to go pat it, and if he gets bitten you know what's liable to happen."

"Someone will put a bullet through its head."

"Precisely."

The next day, when Mary and I went to the Pool, the seal came swimming up to the water's edge to meet us. A few minutes after we had spread rugs and settled ourselves, he hesitantly followed us ashore and flopped down within six feet of where we were sitting. It was delightful to be greeted by this wild creature like awaited guests.

"Hullo!" I said. "How nice to see you! Are you all right?"

The absurd little tail wagged in response, and every line of his sleek body expressed pleasurable anticipation. From the first I talked to him in a normal tone, instead of the nonsense talk human beings commonly use with animals. Most others who met him did, too, possibly because he seemed more than half human himself.

As the seal lay quietly within touching distance, I put out my hand in a slow exploratory gesture, but his head jerked up, the eyes wide and alert.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," said Mary. "Not without wearing heavy gloves."

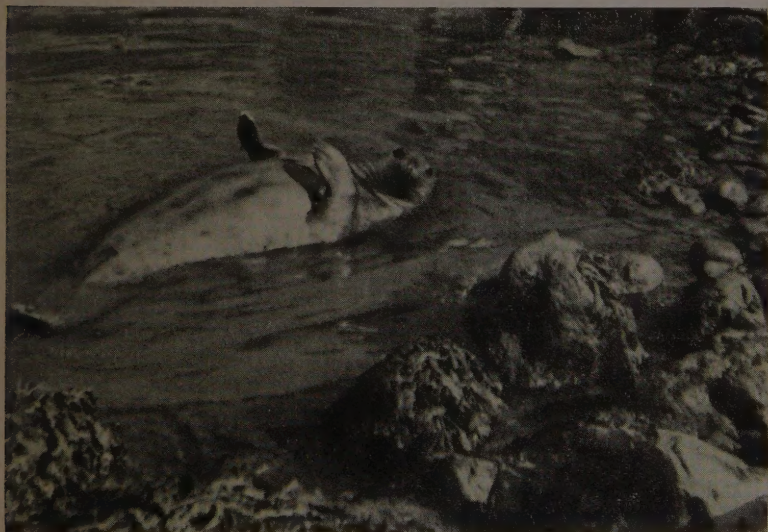
I knew she was right. Those jaws could take a vicious bite, and the head could move like lightning. I gave up. The seal soon left us for a more comfortable patch of smooth rock some 30 or 40 yards away.

A short time later, the Wrights, friends of Mary's, came down to the cove. Their four-year-old daughter was the first on the scene and, racing ahead of her parents, she aimed straight for the seal. Mary and I sprang up with warning shouts, but nothing could stop her. Horrified, we watched as the little girl flung herself down beside the animal and began hugging and kissing it. She evidently thought it was a kind of large dog, for when the rest of us caught up with her, she was crooning, "Dear doggie, good doggie."

The seal responded with every

appearance of delight. His flippers were clasped tightly round the child's body, and he was making a moaning sound. When we tried to pull her away, the seal showed quick resentment; it seemed safer to leave the pair of them undisturb-

learned now that he was a male gray seal (known scientifically as *Halichoerus grypus*), about 18 or 19 months old, and definitely wild. He had a line of scars over his left shoulder, probably made by another seal, for they fight like demons, I



One of his innocent jokes on human friends was pretending to float — in a mere six inches of water!

ed. They played together most of the afternoon, rolling in the sand and the shallows, inseparable.

Fun and Games

BY THE THIRD week of May our friend was a familiar sight at the Pool, swimming from side to side, basking in the shallows or lying on a favorite ledge at low tide. I had

was told, and even in play can be quite rough.

However, he was so patently friendly that few now hesitated to fondle him. He liked to have his stomach rubbed and to be tickled under his foreflippers. Never at a loss to make his requirements understood, he would flop over on his back and hold up a flipper until

someone complied. To attract attention he would swivel around with both ends upturned till he seemed to be ballet-dancing on his stomach. And when he was bored he chewed his fingernails or yawned, politely covering his mouth.

His amiability on shore was beyond doubt, but how would he react when swimmers invaded his own element? A group of us discussed this one windy morning while the seal lay at our feet, and decided that the only way to find out was to go for a swim and see what happened. We drew lots with colored pebbles, and the task fell to me.

I put on a swimsuit and walked to a ledge where the water was waist deep. Immediately the seal flopped into the water and waited, as if he expected me to throw him a bit of seaweed or driftwood to retrieve. None of us had ever taught him this, but he did it voluntarily. When I failed to throw anything he looked at me inquiringly. I dropped off the ledge and stood beside him.

His first reaction was astonishment. Plainly he had thought of us exclusively as land animals. His owlish stare changed to joy. He swam close, put his flippers around my waist and pushed his muzzle into my neck, at the same time making the queer moaning sound that seemed to denote emotion. Pushing him gently away, I began ducking and splashing to show that I was able to romp with him in the water as I had on land. When he

grasped this, his excitement was uncontrollable. He dived, surfaced and rolled like a porpoise; he gyrated about me, pulled me along by taking my arm in his mouth, and drew me down until our faces met under water.

These antics caused such amusement on shore that one by one the others ventured in to join the fun. Now almost beside himself, the seal raced from one to another, embraced and butted us, dived down and pretended to bite our toes, came up underneath and heaved us into the air.

Snaking, gliding and somersaulting went the gleaming acrobat. The strong whiskers tickled us until we shrieked; the flippers suddenly clutched at ankles or calves. He discovered in a few minutes that a deft push at the back of the knees caused us to collapse, and as we sank he poured himself over our shoulders, turning over and peeping at us upside down, his black eyes shining with joy.

Tireless Show-Off

WE HAD a flaming June that year, and, coupled with the newspaper publicity, it brought sight-seers to the cove in increasing numbers. They came, they saw and were enraptured. The seal welcomed them all with the greatest delight.

Now perfectly at ease amid crowds of strangers, he reveled in the admiration, the petting and

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fondling. In fact, it went to his head, and he behaved for a while like a spoiled child — rushing about and knocking over small children, flopping down soaking wet in the middle of picnic parties, snapping at dogs and frightening old ladies.

"Why don't you call him off?" a visitor once asked, as if the seal had been an unruly dog.



Insisting on attention, he would tug at a skirt, sleeve or trouser leg until he got his way

It must be admitted that our friend was somewhat tiresome during this period. He demanded attention all the time and used various methods to obtain it. He tore off lumps of seaweed and tossed them into the air. He rolled on his

back and clapped his flippers together, as sea lions do in circuses when applauding one another's acts.* When this did not attract attention, he grabbed the nearest skirt, sleeve or trouser leg and tugged at it until either the owner complied with his wishes or the fabric gave way. If both these stratagems failed, he bawled. The noise, a kind of barking moo, designed by nature to be audible over the roar of wind and waves, brought everyone within earshot hurrying to see what was the matter with him.

I had been told that skilled animal trainers never scold or punish; they reward good behavior and ignore bad. With our friend, chastisement was useless — through his thick layer of blubber a hard smack must have felt like a gentle pat, for it only delighted him. So when we saw him annoying people, we told them to turn their backs to him. Quite often this proved effective. He was highly sensitive to a rebuff, and would flounce off, looking injured.

Fortunately, by the middle of June he had quieted down, causing no trouble except to yapping little dogs. And he was growing more selective about his company. Those humans who went into the water were preferable to those who stayed on the beach. Those with no fear

* It is always sea lions and not true seals like the Atlantic grays that are trained for circuses.



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of him in the water were preferred to the timid ones. Understandably, the latter were more numerous. When you are new to the experience, it is hard to believe in the harmlessness of a strange wild animal with huge teeth and an absent-minded way of mouthing your arms and legs. Yet the only time he ever bit anyone was when he was startled and involuntarily allowed his jaws to close on a man's forearm. (The man, luckily, was one of his most devoted fans.)

He gradually acquired a sophisticated manner, which showed itself in his behavior with photographers. After a while he seemed to have grasped that the appearance of the little clicking metal object was a signal to stay where he was and keep still. And he did this impeccably — assuming the look of well-bred boredom so often seen on the faces of fashion models.

He also showed a passionate love for music. One day a schoolgirl brought her recorder and began playing to him. When he heard the first notes, he immediately lay down with his head on her knee and his eyes half closed, dreamily nodding. As soon as she stopped, however, he was as uproarious as ever, frolicking, and begging for the games of which he never tired.

By this time, through the columns of the local newspapers, the seal had become known over a wide area as "Sammy." Who first bestowed this name on him we never

discovered. But Sammy the Seal he became, and remained. At least it was better than *Halichoerus grypus*.

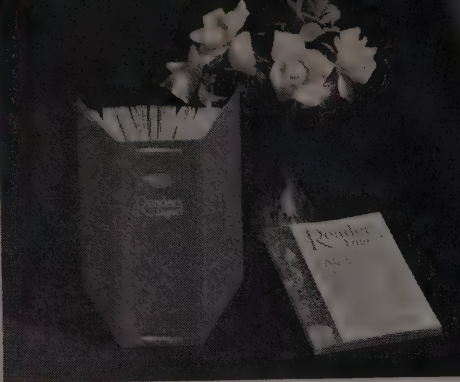
Glimpse of Eden

NONE OF US liked being confined to the shallows when romping with Sammy. But we had no notion how he would behave with swimmers in deep water, and it seemed wise to experiment first. To obviate any risk we needed a lifebelt and a long rope, the use of a dinghy, and a party of five persons: three in the boat and two in the water. Everything was organized. But when we assembled at the Pool the third weekend in June, Sammy was missing.

His absence always alarmed us. A fishing syndicate operated in these waters with a powerboat and trawl nets, and they were no seal lovers. The next day, however, I was relieved to see him floating in the lee of the rocks on the far side of the cove. I called, and he headed inshore.

The cove was empty save for us two. It was very early on a wonderful morning. The Pool shimmered like a sheet of glass under a flawless sky.

I sat beside him at the water's edge, and he laid his head in my lap. The heat made him sleepy. I stroked him until he nodded off. His flippers twitched and his whiskers bristled as he hunted conger eels in his dreams. A shag plum-



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meted into the water near the boat moorings. Sammy snored gently and squirmed farther onto my lap.

Suddenly I had an impulse to conduct the experiment *now*, without preparation, alone. It seemed to me that the other way, so hedged about with safeguards and precautions, was wrong because it was based on distrust. I thought: he knows that his teeth can hurt me if he does not restrain himself, because my skin is thinner and my body more vulnerable than his own. He can only have learned this through picking up a warning signal from me. In the same way he will know that when we swim together he must not cling to my legs.

Pushing him gently off my lap, I opened my beach bag, took out a swimsuit and changed. Also I put on my rubber fins. If I was wrong—if he did attempt to take me down with him in a deep dive—after kicking myself free I would be able to rise to the surface more quickly.

He was still asleep when I waded in. I had swum 50 yards before he wakened and came after me. In a few seconds he bobbed up in front of me, looking perplexed. I went on at a steady crawl. He shot ahead again and stood up. His flippers held in front of his stomach and his eyes round with surprise, he looked like an anxious nanny. Without words he was asking, "Is this right? Ought you to come so far?"

And suddenly, as before, aware-

ness of an altered relationship showed in his face. He barked joyfully, swam round me in rapid circles, turned a back somersault, crash-dived and performed a whole new series of triumphant aquabatics.

I swam on to the center of the Pool where the depth is 20 feet or more, and he accompanied me, swimming about eight feet down. In the clear water I could see him looking at me. His eyes and nose were black points of a triangle in an aureole of white whiskers. Without appearing to accelerate he suddenly spurted ahead, then did a banking turn and a half roll. This brought him directly underneath me again but upside down. In this position, he shot straight down out of sight.

By the time he reappeared I was resting, floating on my back. He joined me and did the same. Side by side we lay in the clear, still water. The cliffs looked small with distance, the beach was a far-off tawny sickle. There was nothing but an immensity of sea and sky and the two of us in a communion of happiness. As the tide rocked us closer together I reached for his flipper and held it. He turned his head and gazed into my face.

I was conscious of some powerful magnetism that emanated from unseen depths, reached out and touched some answering chord in myself. I had felt the same magnetism the first time I saw Sammy,

but now I understood it. In that moment the curtain moved aside, and I looked back through time to the morning of the world, before man was shunned by other living things.

It was a glimpse of Eden.

A flash of metal on the headland above the cove told me that other visitors had arrived. I could see a car parked beside my own, and by the time I reached the beach the owners were already on their way down. I quickly towed myself and changed, packed the beach bag and hurried away, leaving Sammy to welcome the new arrivals. I could not share him with strangers just then.

Laughter and Tears

SAMMY HAD a definite, though somewhat crude, sense of humor, and we were not long in discovering it. One joke that he frequently practiced was a deep dive right underneath some unsuspecting bather, who would suddenly find himself hoisted into the air as if on a waterspout. A nip on the buttocks was another favorite joke, accomplished by a lightning twist of the head as he sped by.

He loved to streak toward a bather like a torpedo, and then come to a dead stop within half a yard by jamming on the brakes in a flurry of foam. The braking was effected by hurling his head and shoulders back and thrusting his flippers forward. This seemed to be tremen-

dously enjoyable and was always followed by seal "laughter" — baring his front teeth and flattening his whiskers sideways.

He also liked to swim up behind bathers and hitch on with his teeth to the seat of their swimsuits or trunks. Out of this grew the hilarious idea of trying to remove the trunks. I was one of the first victims. One day, wearing an old two-piece swimsuit with a slack elastic in the pants waist, I was floating face downward off the shore in about five feet of water, intently searching the bottom for a child's lost sandal. Suddenly I felt his whiskers brush the back of my thighs, then a tug — and the next moment I heard howls of laughter. It transpired that my posterior was abruptly revealed to everyone on the crowded beach.

The success of any jest being measured in Sammy's mind by the applause it evoked, we knew that repetition of this masterpiece was inevitable. It soon became commonplace to hear one bather shout a warning to another: "Look out! *Hold on to your pants!*"

From inside a derelict blockhouse I sometimes watched Sammy when he thought himself unobserved. Never at these times did I see him behave as he did before an audience. His antics were designed for the amusement of others, not himself.

He had an extensive range of utterances. When excited or impa-

tient he barked, not like a dog but with a sound nearer to a bellow. He used a variety of grunts, chuckles and chortles to convey contentment, an equal range of wails, sobs and howls for venting grief. He was so emotional that we often refrained from a certain course of action for fear of precipitating a "scene." He liked, for instance, to lie sprawled over our legs when we sat on the beach. Even on a chilly day we would endure the contact of his damp, cold skin sooner than push him away. When it was time to go home we would go to elaborate lengths to conceal our departure from him because of the wails and sobs that followed us up the ravine.

A seal has no lachrymal ducts, so when Sammy cried the tears poured straight down his cheeks. The sight was so affecting that few remained indifferent to it.

Alan Lander, who often watched him from the boathouse, says that after the last visitor had gone, Sammy would tearfully survey the deserted beach and shuffle to the ledge where he customarily lay. After a while he would cease crying and heave a great sigh. Then, as if saying, "Oh, well, there's always food," he would flop into the sea and go fishing.

A "Lifeless" Body

SAMMY bestowed liking indiscriminately, but his love he reserved for the special few who would swim with him in deep water. Per-

haps because I was the first to do so, I seemed to come first in his affections.

Our meetings now had a new significance. He trembled with joy, and his impatience to get into the water was conveyed in barks and whines. He always plunged in ahead of me and waited for me to decide which way we would go. Often we would swim to the mouth of the cove and beyond, around the eastern reef to the lonely bay under St. Aldhelm's Head where few people come because there is no beach.

Here one day, after a long swim, I climbed out to rest while Sammy cruised about in the kelp and the rock crannies. The water was glassy-clear, and from my vantage point on a high boulder I could watch him and marvel at his sinuous grace and the effortless speed with which he chased a fish. Small prey he ate under water, swallowing them at a gulp, without slackening speed. He could store enough oxygen in his blood system to enable him to stay submerged for as long as ten minutes.

After a while I lay back and dropped off to sleep. Some time later, the heat of the sun blazing down on the bare rock wakened me. I looked for Sammy, but he was nowhere to be seen. Of course he was free to come and go as he chose; all the same, he did not generally leave when we went on expeditions together.

Then I noticed a deep channel

undercutting the boulder on which I stood. At the near end it dipped to a cup-shaped hollow where the depth was about eight feet. And down at the bottom of this hollow was a gray shape, its outline blurred by the ruffled surface of the water.

My heart turned over. It was Sammy lying face down, motionless, his flippers asprawl. With every surge of water from the seaward end his body lurched to one side, then fell back. I cried his name again and again, not with any hope that he would answer me but in the futile certainty that he was dead.

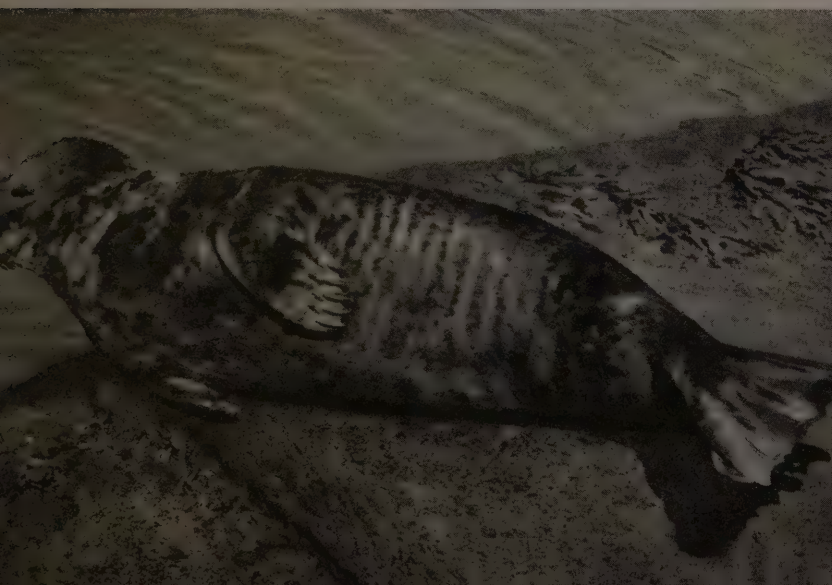
What had happened while I

slept? A rifle shot from a passing boat? But there was no blood, no mark of injury. Poison in the fish he had eaten? Unlikely.

Then, as I was about to dive in, I noticed that the position of his body had changed. The head and torso were raised, and rising still. He was being slowly lifted as if by an invisible agency. When the top of his nose broke surface the upward motion ceased and he hung suspended.

More certain than ever that he was dead, I poised myself again to dive and retrieve him. But again I stopped, halted this time by a minute movement. Though his eyes

He had a mania for sunbathing. Stretched out at the water's edge, or on his favorite ledge, he soaked up the heat for hours at a time. With his fur bone-dry he looked like a plush-covered bolster



were closed, his nostrils had opened, and there was a movement, a fractional expansion and retraction, in the region of his lungs.

He was asleep! The marvelous safeguards of his diving mechanism had lifted him, without conscious

carried in the water like this was one of the things he most enjoyed. Then, pushing him in front of me and thrashing with my legs, I worked my way out of the channel into the open sea, and together we swam back to the Pool.



When he had no one to romp with and was bored, he chewed his fingernails or yawned

volition; to the surface to replenish his oxygen supply. He breathed in and out very rapidly for about ten seconds and then, still without opening his eyes or giving any other sign of life, sank to the bottom again.

Lowering myself into the water, I swam down and touched him lightly on the neck. Instantly he was awake. There was no transitional stage. He rolled over and welcomed me. His eyes were clear and shining black. I put my arms under him and carried him with me to the surface. He lay inert, his head and hind flippers dangling. Being

In the Mermaid's Grotto

DURING THE summer I occasionally visited Seacombe Cove, another of the many inlets within reach of my home, and on one memorable September day there I noticed a familiar retrieverlike head nosing round a rock in the water. It was Sammy, either fishing or come in search of me. I had been busy, and had not seen him at Chapman's Pool for three weeks.

I dived in to meet him, and he nuzzled me affectionately, then raced off. It seemed clear that there was something he wanted to show me, and it was important.

He led the way to a tiny, white-pebbled beach a few hundred yards to the west of the cove that can be reached only by boat or by swimming. I had explored it many times. There was a cave here, running from the beach deep into the cliff, and screened from above by an overhang. It had always seemed to me an ideal place for a seal.

Sammy hauled out and stretched himself flat on the pebbles. Pretending to be very surprised and pleased, I walked about examining the interior of the cave, picking up

various bits of flotsam and all the time talking to him, expressing my appreciation in glowing terms.

"It's wonderful, a marvelous place. How *clever* of you to have found it!"

He watched me with beaming complacency. Finally I splashed into the sea. "You've shown me your secret place," I said. "Now I'll show you mine."

He shot ahead, as he always did, waiting for me to catch up. At times he was so far ahead that he had time for a dive and a look around. If the water was clear I might see him far below, coasting along with no more effort than a flick and a wriggle. His body swerved in arcs of incomparable grace. Sometimes he was a bird in lazy flight, a hawk banking in the wind; then he would quicken speed and vanish like a silver arrow into the waving tresses of the weed we call mermaid's hair. At such moments I longed unspeakably for an Aqua-lung, so that I could join him in his weightless flight through the peacock-green firmament.

There is another cavern on the eastern side of Seacombe Cove. The interior is of smooth basalt whose rosy tint permeates the translucent water. Rising up in the center of this pink grotto is a wedge-shaped rock on which the Lorelei herself might have sat combing her sea-green hair. It is a proper place for a mermaid—and also perfectly adapted for a chute. The gentler

incline is rough, offering good foothold, and the steep side is very slippery.

I swam to the back, climbed up, and slid down feet first with a tremendous splash. Sammy's eyes opened wide with excitement. He tried to climb up the front but could not get a grip. I pulled him off and maneuvered him around to the other side. He was grunting with impatience. It was not easy for him even at the back because the rock was coated with algae, so I had to help him. At first I shoved from behind, then I stood on the ridge and hauled him up by his flippers. He panted with the effort and, just when I had got him into position, blew such a blast of fishy breath into my face that I fell over backward. We shot down together in a tangle of arms, legs and flippers, and had to start all over again.

It did not take him long, though, to master the technique. At the third attempt he clambered up unaided and went whizzing down the slide with an expression of pure ecstasy on his face.

After that he was not to be distracted for a moment from this glorious game. I was only able to take a turn myself if I could get up while he was coming down, but this was seldom because he was so quick. Barely had he plummeted into the water than he would twist like an eel around the base of the rock and start climbing up again. I was nearly always caught in a

highly vulnerable position at the summit and butted off head first.

When finally I went to the entrance he ignored my call, giving me a look that said, "You go if you like. I'm quite happy here." I called again several times, and at last he came, glancing back yearningly at the wonderful rock but evidently unwilling to let me leave without him.

This was the only time I met him away from the Pool. He was showing less and less inclination to leave it. Summer was ending. Already the children had gone back to school, and the flood of visitors had dwindled to a trickle. Somehow, Sammy seemed to be aware that he must make the most of the time that remained.

A Fond Farewell

OCTOBER is for us the best month of the year. The sun shines, the sea is still warm, and we revel in the peace of our coves and beaches after the departure of the holiday crowds. However, in October of 1961 the gales came early, and before the month was out our lawns were white with frost. I knew Sammy must be lonely, but I managed to get down to the Pool only rarely.

Alan Lander found him one day at the top of the slip, and next day right up on the green, 100 yards from the sea. Plainly he had gone to look for the playmates who had vanished so unaccountably. Percy Wallace noticed a change in the

seal's temperament: he got fits of the sulks. One day several of us congregated at the Pool. We called him and he came, and for a while we played with him. The wind was blowing hard, and before long the others left.

Soon there occurred one of those abrupt changes to which the weather in this region is liable. From the edge of a pall of cloud the sun burst out. The Pool turned from gray and dun to blue and gold. The beach pebbles glittered as if strewn with diamond dust. This joyous transformation galvanized Sammy into one of his archly playful moods. He came to me, rolled over onto my feet, frisking, wriggling and making mock snaps. When I stopped to fondle him he grabbed the sleeve of my jacket and began to tug in the usual direction, down toward the water. What he wanted was written in every line of his urgent body.

I looked at his pleading eyes; I looked at the cold sea. I said, "No." And then I thought, it will be the last, perhaps the last time ever. So I took off my clothes and slid into a pool between the rocks. The water was cold. I stayed in for about five minutes, and we played the best of the familiar games with uproarious splashing and laughter. It was the more perfect because so short and because I knew, as he knew, that it was the last time.

Next day the weather worsened. Gales and thunderstorms raged for

a week. I telephoned Percy twice during the early days of November. The second time he said, "Yes, the seal's still there. But if you want to see him again, you'd better go quick."

I drove down to the Pool. The day was gray and very cold. The sullen sky looked full of foreboding. From above, the cove looked deserted, but finally I saw Sammy mounted on a rock and staring at the horizon. The tide was high. There was a big sea running. I had to edge along close under the cliff to reach the slipway. He gave me a welcome that was full of affection, but his eyes were troubled. He kept shaking his head and whining. I sat down and took his head in my hands, stroking it until he quietened. All the time I talked softly.

"Stay with us. The winter will pass, and another summer will come. Don't go. Stay here with us."

He was heavy. My legs were cramped, and the wet stones were icy cold. I got up. Directly I did so he moved away from me a little, then a little more, down toward the water, looking searchingly at me as I followed.

While I stood irresolute, a wave ran up the slip and he became waterborne, but he held his position and continued to watch me out of flat, black, tormented eyes. The

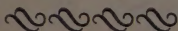
next wave licked at my feet. I turned and ran, scrambling from rock to rock between the seas that crashed and tore at the stones, until I reached the ravine.

Nearing the top, I looked down, muddled and gasping for breath, and saw the gray shape, small with distance, swimming through the breakers. The head, now visible, now lost, pointed westward into the haze of cloud wrack and spindrift over the center of the Pool.

There he paused and turned, and I felt his relentless gaze on me as I went on and up over the lip of the headland.

When next I looked, the sea had taken him. He has never returned.

WHERE Sammy came from and where he went I was never able to discover. If he has survived, he will now be five years old, a majestic male, nearing maturity and already challenging the overlords of whatever breeding ground he has chosen. In the pride of his potency and the lust of battle, he will have forgotten the months he spent, and the games he played, on a far-off Dorset coast. But we will never forget. He came like a messenger from a distant, happier world, and when he departed he left us the richer for having known and loved him.



A LOT of unpopular after-dinner speeches are on the subject of helping with the dishes.

— D. O. Flynn

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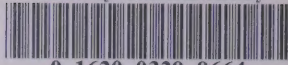
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